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HOUSEHOLD CALENDAR

Wash Dresses That Will Wash

A radio talk by Miss Ruth Van Deman, Bureau of Home Economics, delivered in the Department of Agriculture period of the National Farm and Home Hour, broadcast by a network of 48 associate NBC stations, Thursday, May 14, 1936.

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MR. SALISBURY: Now for this day so near the middle of the merry month of May, Miss Van Deman tells me she elected to talk to the women of this audience about wash dresses for summer wear. Sounds like a timely topic, Miss Van Deman, in view of some of the weather we've been having lately.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes, this seems to be one of the seasons here in Washington when we jump straight from winter to summer.

MR. SALISBURY: Didn't you feel that polar breeze this morning?

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes, but it will likely be a tropic breeze tomorrow. and we'll be scurrying around for cool dresses of wash materials. I went down to our textile and clothing division the other day and had a talk with Clarice Scott. She showed me fabrics and dress designs, and I finally asked her to describe the ideal wash dress. Or anyway to give the main points that make for service and comfort in summer wash dresses.

"The first thing to check on is to be sure a wash dress will wash." She laughed and said that probably sounded a little dumb, but it's astonishing how many so-called wash dresses have something about them that won't wash or iron. Maybe it's the fabric, or the way the parts of the dress are cut from the fabric, or the general style of the dress. Sometimes the trouble is with the seams or the kind of finishes around the neck and sleeves, or with the fastenings.

Miss Scott had plenty of examples to illustrate every one of these points. I remember especially one cotton material with a cord running through it cross-wise to give a shirred effect. Very attractive when new, but every time that dress was washed it drew up like a piece of ribbed knit underwear and had to be stretched back into shape on the ironing board. By way of contrast, Miss Scott showed me smooth, evenly woven fabrics that you could wash and iron like an old handkerchief, the kind that hold their color in the tub and in the sun and even when wet with perspiration. Also that have been preshrunk by the manufacturer until they won't shrink any more. She had a lot of labels that she had collected from ready-made dresses and wash fabrics. Some gave definite facts about the color, and shrinkage and other washing qualities. But some were vague as vague -- just said "washable." By the way, when you see that word "washable" alone on a label, better keep your fingers crossed. It may mean something and it may mean nothing.

Perhaps you've noticed the dress fabrics marked "anti-crease" or "non-crush." They are one of the very latest developments in textile manufacture, said to be the result of 14 years of research to find a way of giving cotton and other vegetable fibers springiness and resistance to wrinkling. After countless experiments the textile experts discovered that treating the cotton with resin would give it a permanent wrinkle-proof finish.

Miss Scott showed me a dark blue cotton voile that has this anti-crease finish. It's had one whole season of hard wear, with many trips to the washtub, but it still looks just as crisp and fresh as when it was new. It hasn't a suggestion about it of that tired, limp look that so many cotton voile dresses get after about the third wearing.

Nowadays you may also find some fabrics labeled as "water-spot proof." They've been given a finish with wax and other chemicals to render them resistant to water spots. Sometimes this "splash-proof" finish is permanent, sometimes it disappears after a few washings. You'll have to read the label carefully to be sure whether the finish is permanent.

I saw a very interesting report the other day of the methods commercial laboratories are adopting for their tests on these service features of fabrics. It describes standard tests on such points as color fastness to crocking and to wet and dry cleaning, and to light and perspiration, also shrinkage and slippage of the yarns. This trade agreement is a very hopeful sign for consumers. It shows what is going on behind the scenes that will ultimately mean more definite information about the goods we buy.

When we came to talk about the workmanship on wash dresses, Miss Scott brought out a whole array of good and bad examples. As you probably gathered, she is a regular stickler for good workmanship on clothes. Every garment should be cut true with the grain of the goods. And the seams, and fastenings, and so on, should be suited to the kind of fabric and to the wear you are going to give the garment. On some wash dresses she showed me seams that had frayed and others so skimpy and uneven that they were literally hanging by the ragged edge. She pointed to the need for close, even machine stitching. If the stitches are long and loose and the thread is poor in quality, you'll probably have to sew up a few rips before you've worn the dress twice. And she had "horrible" examples of buttonholes that had pulled out, of pockets that weren't properly reinforced at the corners and had caused ugly three-corner tears, and of buttons and buckles that had warped and chipped and cracked and rusted and otherwise gone bad in the laundry. To match every bad example she had a good one to show that every feature of a wash dress can be strictly washable if you just take time to pick that kind.

MR. SALISBURY: Well Miss Van Deman, when you home economists have solved all the problems there are to solve about women's summer dresses, I just wish you'd start your researching on hot weather clothes for men.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Why I just came by a whole window full of the whitest, neatest, coolest looking linen suits. What's the matter with them?

MR. SALISBURY: Nice and white in the store window, yes, but for what men think about wearing white linen suits, I'd like to read you a few lines of an editorial I saw in the paper the other day. It described all sorts of modern inventions to make the human race healthier and happier, and ended up this way. "But still ... no one has yet produced anything better for sweltering men than the usual wrinkleable, not to say shrinkable, outfit unthinkable, old linen suit." You see we do need help, Miss Van Deman.

MISS VAN DEMAN: All right, we'll take it under advisement, but we still have plenty to do on women's dresses.